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**City Of Bellingham, Department of Planning and Community Development**

**Consultants:**

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- Sollod Studio
- CANDELA
- SPARLING
- springline design LLC
- Zervas Group Architects
Background

In 2002 the City of Bellingham and Whatcom County formed the Bellingham Whatcom Public Facilities District (BWPFD) and identified portions of the City Center Master Plan area as a designated Regional Center for culture and the arts. BWPFD has focused state and local revenues to create an improved cultural Arts District.

The mission of the BWPFD is to fund a regional center to increase economic prosperity and lay a foundation for future public and private investment in the community.

Context
The Arts District spans the area between the civic center to the north and commercial core to the south; it also connects to the Old Town district and the Bellingham Bay waterfront.
Arts District Vision

Developing a Vision

Working together, city staff, community representatives and the consultant, prepared a placemaking vision for the Arts District aimed at making great public spaces.

The work was begun by a two day workshop in the summer of 2006 conducted by Project for Public Spaces (PPS), a non profit group specialized in community placemaking. Following the PPS workshop city staff conducted several site evaluation exercises with the public. The public input in addition to several meetings with stakeholder groups helped identify a range of opportunities within the district as well as formulating a vision for the Arts District.

Arts District Vision

The Arts District becomes a unique place to live, work and play— a place where people gather to create, celebrate, learn, and grow year round.

Project Vision

- The public realm function as Bellingham’s “living room”, with dynamic and engaging public spaces.
- Public improvements in the Arts District stimulate more activities, private investment and cultural development.

Streetscape Design Objectives

- Communicate the “vision” of the district as a special area.
- Create an attractive environment to encourage private investment and one that builds and supports the local economy.
- Incorporate principles of “green design”.
- Strengthen the street level connections between the key cultural facilities.
- Improve opportunities for frequent and meaningful contact among citizen by creating places that attracts a diverse population
- Increase accessibility and promote a sense of comfort and safety
- Extend the “reach” of the district through connections to the surrounding districts.
The Arts District is defined by cultural destinations such as the Bellingham Public Library, the Whatcom Museum, the Art and Children’s Museum, and the Mount Baker Theatre. In order to strengthen the character of the district the character of these important cultural destinations needs to be reflected in the public realm. This includes places and connections within the district such as plazas, streets and park space.

**Placemaking Map**

- Cultural destinations
- Other Iconic buildings (based on public input)
- Potential locations of future library within the Arts District
- Primary pedestrian connectors
- Secondary pedestrian connectors
- Pedestrian connectors to other districts
- Places for people
Places

History

History is reflected not only in the architecture of the Whatcom Museum building but also as a distinguishing feature of Prospect Street.

The connection to history and the environment is strengthened by strong visual elements that reinforce the relationship between the Arts District and Maritime Heritage Park.

The physical connection between Prospect Street and the bluff overlooking the waterfront is strengthened, bringing people to a public viewpoint/gathering place behind the museum – a place where history and the natural environment merge.

Art & Kids

The Art and Children’s Museum becomes a magnet for adults and children interested in art and discovery and the museum café becomes a destination for lunch or afternoon tea.

The presence of the museum helps stimulate the development of a gallery district and unique retail shops and small cafes find affinity in this area.

The streetscape incorporates unique artwork in proximity to the museum and the Library, attracting adults and children to combine their visits.

Drama

As the major performing arts institution in the area, the Mt Baker Theatre activates its street front with theatrical-related media.

As a primary access point to the Arts District, the intersection of Commercial and Champion denotes a grand entrance, pulling the intimate block of Commercial into the Theatre’s sphere. Here the emphasis is on pedestrians with “mood lighting” that takes advantage of Northwest misty winters.
Café’ Society @ Grand and Champion

Books, coffee, wine and chocolate stimulate conversation and lingering into the evening. This is a place where people come to exchange ideas.

Potential exists for special events to reinforce this part of the district as an informal gathering place. The streets encourage browsing and serendipity.

Urban Hip @ Bay and Holly

This is the part of the Arts District where “anything can happen”. Eclectic shops, theatre, museum, cinema, street fairs, outdoor cinema, and concerts create a dynamic and diverse place.

The improved intersection emphasizes pedestrians over cars by incorporating visual clues that slow traffic and promote walking.

Education- The new library

Anchoring the north end of the Arts District is the Bellingham Public Library, a key civic institution fostering education and the exchange of ideas. Drawing residents of all ages, the library’s annual visits number approximately 700,000.

Tying the library to its sister institutions, the Art and Children’s Museum, the Mount Baker Theatre and the Whatcom Museum of History and Art, through art and design in the streetscape, will encourage walking within the Arts District.

Joint programming of festivals and special events in the park adjacent to the library promotes synergy between these organizations, enlivening street life overall.
Realizing the vision

Enhance the Special Features of the Area

• Preserve and highlight the historic and iconic buildings in the District.
• Enhance view corridors to iconic buildings, industrial waterfront, Sehome Hill and the Bay.
• Make the cultural destinations even better and well connected.
• Build upon the artsy, funky, eclectic mix of uses in the area.

Increase the number of things to do in the Arts District

• Encourage more locally owned retail on the first floors of buildings.
• Develop more upper story office and residential uses.
• Encourage small businesses to spill out onto the sidewalks including seating and merchandise.
• Allow and encourage more street vendors.
• Design the public places to support activities and programming like concerts, film, vendors, theatre and kids activities.

Make streets the great public space they deserve to be

• Share the streets more equitably between vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians.
• Slow the car traffic by:
  - Taking out right turn lanes on Bay/Holly and Champion/Grand and adding that space to the pedestrian realm.
  - Providing more sidewalk space, better crosswalks and more bump-outs.
  - Adding activity areas on either side of the street.
  - Creating pedestrian zones at intersections.
• Encourage property owners who operate surface parking lots to redevelop those properties.
• Over time, create alternative parking options and transportation choices.
Create a pedestrian-friendly environment

• Work with property and business owners to improve their window fronts making them more interesting. Add comfort amenities such as awnings.
• Enhance the walking experience by adding interest to blank walls.
• Provide covered spaces for people to sit outside when it rains.
• Create pedestrian friendly and business activated alleys.
• Enhance the public realm with amenities such as:
  - pedestrian wayfinding
  - benches and moveable chairs
  - interactive and thought provoking art and sculpture
  - short and long term bike parking
  - landscaping, lighting, litter receptacles

Develop Partnerships

There are a number of organizations and businesses that could work together to help improve the Arts district. These include:

• Public partners, like the City of Bellingham, the Bellingham-Whatcom Public Facilities District, the Whatcom Transit Authority and Whatcom County.

• Public institutions such as the Bellingham Public Library, the Whatcom museum, the Art & Children’s Museum, the Mount Baker Theatre and the Western Washington University.

• Private cultural destinations such as the American Museum of Radio and Electricity, the Mindport, the Pickford Theatre, and the Upfront Theatre.

• Community organizations such as the Downtown Renaissance Network and Sustainable Connections.

• Other arts organizations, galleries and local artists.
• Retail outlets, including eateries and bookstores.
• Private property and business owners
• Residents
• Churches

There are already a number of partnerships that are developed in Bellingham. A good example is the partnership between the City of Bellingham and local businesses to put on a concert series called “Downtown Sounds” in the alley between Magnolia Street and W. Holly Street.
Artwork-Network

The notion of Artwork-Network relates to the idea that the district is a network of streets and that the art within it represents a network of experiences. The metaphor relates to two different ideas of what composes a network.

On the one hand, it refers to basic weaving technique. The streets represent the “warp”, the stationary threads under tension in a weaving. The trees, furnishings, artwork represent the weft that move through the warp threads. The “warp” provides the structure that holds the weaving in place. The weft provides the dynamic energy that gives it texture and life. They are synergistic.

On the other hand, in considering a network, it implies all the various permutations and combinations of movements, stationary and movable objects and relationships that hold the place in a dynamic tension.

We can think of network as a kind of musical score that in relation to streets describes movement between the various points of interest in the district, with the design elements providing the energy.
The Conceptual Plan is an initial study of what the future Arts District could look like. It includes ideas and recommendations aimed at strengthening the character of the Art District and promoting future investment and cultural development.

The Conceptual Plan is a long term plan with anticipated implementation starting in 2007. The ideas and recommendations will need to be realized incrementally as additional public funds become available and private development occurs.
Design Character Goals for the Arts District

Based on previous planning documents (City Center Master Plan) and extensive public input a Conceptual Master plan has been developed for the Arts District. The goal is to strengthen arts and other cultural activities within the district by continued development with an emphasis on cultural institutions and commercial enterprises that support the Arts District Vision.

The goal is to mix commercial and residential uses with cultural activities to provide a diversity of experiences and to help animate the area. The focus is on a high quality pedestrian experience, with streetscape design that provides structure and identity to the area.
How to use the Streetscape Design Guidelines

The purpose of the Arts District Streetscape Design Guidelines is to provide a vision, guiding principles, and development standards to establish the character of streetscape within the Arts District.

Improvements made over time

The vision for the Arts District can only be realized through combined efforts by the City of Bellingham and the various interests groups within and surrounding the district.

The new Arts District Streetscape will not be built all at once. The details and elements of the Streetscape Design Guidelines allow for sequencing so that each new phase of improvements will be consistent with the previous and ultimately lead to the overall unification of the Arts District.

Whatcom Museum and Mount Baker Theatre are two of the most noticeable historic buildings in the Arts District. Streetscape Design guidelines help ensure that future development and renovations will be attractive and sensitive to the Art District Vision.
Sidewalks

Streets and sidewalks are part of the warp in the Arts District. By establishing a sidewalk standard the district will have a more unified look in the future.

The sidewalk standard will be a baseline design that can be implemented as redevelopment happens. It creates a framework that can be added to with design and art to create place-specific designs.

The sidewalk standard could include permeable materials such as pervious concrete and pavers.

Opportunities to include wayfinding elements in the sidewalks will also be studied further.

Establish sidewalk standard

Intersections

The intersections will be emphasized as places. This will be accomplished through bulb-outs and crosswalks, potentially in a contrasting material, creating a safer traffic environment for both pedestrians and cars.

An intersection standard will be developed that addresses traffic safety and adds aesthetic value to the District. This intersection standard can be implemented as resources becomes available.

Establish intersection standard
The intersections represent opportunities to incorporate storm water planters in the bulb outs. A grid of this stormwater system is illustrated. Eventually, this approach, could be taken at all of these locations or in just a few of them. The idea is that the stormwater runoff from streets and roofs within the district will be taken care of in these planters, reducing peak runoff and retaining water that could be used for landscape irrigation or in a water feature.

A few places within the Arts District call for an overall unique design treatment. The intersection of Bay and Holly Street and the overlook at the west side of the Whatcom museum are two of the places within the district that could have a special paving exclusive to those locations. Specialty paving could include a combination of concrete, stone, glass, ceramic and other materials.
Street furniture

Street furniture such as benches, planters, fountains, and sculptures enhance the visual experience and reduce apparent walking lengths.

Seating

Seating should be provided where the potential for social activity exists, outside museums, theatres and movie theatres; and at public meeting spots such as Bay/Holly Plaza. Different kinds of seating (benches, single chairs, etc.) and seating arrangements should be provided to allow for socializing and gathering along the main pedestrian connectors through the Arts district. Secondary seating such as planters, curbs, rails, and other raised surfaces should be encouraged in future developments. Any height between 12” to 20” works for seating with 16” to 18” being the best. An appropriate seat width ranges from 6” to 24”.

Existing artist designed benches at Bay Street
Photo: City Of Bellingham

Examples of artist designed benches
Photo: City Of Bellingham
**Trash receptacles**

Trash and recycling receptacles are intended to provide a clean environment as well as facilitate trash and recycling collection and should be placed in locations that are easily accessible to both pedestrians and sanitation workers.

The existing trash receptacle within the district is a good example of artist designed street furniture. These need to be complimented with a matching recycling receptacle.

![Existing trash receptacle](image)

**Bike parking**

In order to reinforce Bellingham’s commitment to alternative means of transportation, bicycle parking should be readily available within the Arts District.

Bicycle racks should be located along bicycle shared streets and at destinations such as the museums, the Mount Baker Theatre, and along streets with retail and eateries such as Bay Street and Grand Avenue between W Champion and Central Avenue.

Racks should be located so that they stay clear of pedestrian paths of travel. The City of Bellingham standard bike rack should be used.
Street trees and landscaping

Landscaping is an important component of creating a more inviting and visually interesting streetscape within the Arts District. Continuous street tree plantings provide a unifying character to the streets and helps with wayfinding. Flowering trees and plantings provide interest throughout the season and serve as conversation pieces and encourage interaction between people. The goal of the overall layout of street trees is to create a walkable Arts District that is beautiful, functional, enjoyable, memorable, and a source of community pride.

The key elements to street tree selection include:

Safety and Comfort:
Street trees and plantings are used to reduce the scale of the street and establish a sense of separation and safety for people who choose to walk instead of drive. Street trees provide shade and improves local air quality.

Plant Variety:
Different species are used to accent and give identity to the various streets such as Grand Avenue and Flora Street. Tree species vary in order to avoid a monoculture and to pro-
vide seasonal interest with flowering trees and colorful fall foliage.

Environmental Appropriateness and Base of Maintenance:
Plants are selected for their horticultural suitability, water requirements, and reliability to survive with limited maintenance.

Grand Avenue:
Querqus palustris ‘Crownright’/Pin Oak
Grand Avenue has an 80’ row, making it the widest street in the Arts District. The “grand” street is emphasized by a larger street tree like Pin Oak that over time will give the street a strong character. Wider sidewalks allow larger tree pits to accommodate the needs of the oak.

Flora Street:
Pyrus calleryana ‘Aristocrat’/Aristocrat flowering pear
This pear tree is pyramidal in its form and flowers profusely early in spring. Fall color ranges from yellow to red.

Central Avenue:
Fraxinus oxycarpa ‘Raywood’/Raywood ash
The Raywood ash has a delicate, lacey canopy that filters sunlight nicely and has a beautiful purple red fall color.

N Commercial Street:
Acer platanoides ‘Crimson King’/Norway maple
This maple has pretty clusters of small, greenish flowers in the spring and a beautiful purple fall color.

Prospect Street:
Zelkova serrata “Schmidtlow”/Wireless zelkova
The Wireless zelkova has a smooth grey bark and a low, spreading canopy that will keep clear of the power lines. It has a beautiful red fall color.

Champion Street:
Ginkgo biloba ‘Sentry’/Ginkgo
The Gingko tree has a prominent, pyramidal canopy that turns golden yellow in fall.

Tree grates
Custom tree grates is an easy way of providing a unifying element in the streetscape. A custom, artist designed, tree grate will be used throughout the Arts District.

Example of artist designed tree grate
Photo:E.Sollod
Lighting

Lighting can add character and a sense of safety to an urban environment, in a sustainable manner. Bellingham's darker Winter season -overcast days with longer nights- creates a unique opportunity to use lighting in dramatic and psychologically uplifting ways to emphasize the pedestrian experience.

Existing light fixtures

Conceptual lighting masterplan
The Arts District lighting will have three components: pedestrian scale street lighting; architectural lighting of special buildings; and specialty lighting to bring drama to particular locations.

Improved lighting technologies (with better color rendering) raise visibility while allowing energy savings. Pedestrian scale poles create an identity to the streetscapes. Looking into the future and utilizing today’s best design alternatives, a selection of contemporary luminaries will be made in ongoing tests and evaluations.

Specific historic sites (Whatcom Museum, Mount Baker Theater) will be retrofitted with improved technology in the existing historic twin acorn lantern luminaries. Intersections, where pedestrian-vehicular interaction is greater, will have raised illuminance levels.
Places as Art

The Arts District vision embodies the notion that art, open space, streetscape design, and architecture combine to form a seamless experience for the pedestrian.

Viewing the Arts District as a series of places for people, the streets become the threads that hold all of it together and artwork becomes as an integral part of defining the Arts District as a unique part in the City.

Art and place specific design is a way of personalizing the city, it shows that cities are foremost for people and not only about function. Art can be incorporated in every component of the urban fabric. For example, an artist designed tree grate can reinforce the overall identity of the district.

For example, an artist designed tree grate can reinforce the overall identity of the district. Other artworks will become character-defining elements in special locations:

- The plaza in front of the Art and Children’s museum should be designed in coordination with an artist who may make a singular work of art for this location.
- The intersection of Bay and Holly and the adjacent plaza should be a design team effort where the artist and landscape architect collaborate to create a unified place incorporating art.
- The plaza behind the Whatcom Museum and the alley access to Flora Street should likewise be designed as a unified place by an artist/landscape architect team.
- Specialty lighting and character defining elements for the alley between Holly and Magnolia should be a collaboration between an artist and lighting designer.

Art can be free standing site specific sculpture as well as unique elements included in building facades as ornamentation and artist designed street furniture: tree grates, utility covers, benches.
The City of Bellingham hosts an annual outdoor sculpture exhibition. Currently, works are selected through an open jury process and placed primarily around City Hall and the Library. We recommend transforming this exhibition to an Arts District-wide program that is curated rather than juried. By engaging an independent curator, the exhibition will have a more cohesive focus. Rather than designating specific sites, we have identified “zones” where art could be located.

The art zones will create opportunities for a variety of works—some might occur on the ground, other overhead; some might be landscape-based; other, new media—rather than simply sighting works on pedestals. This could create a dynamic and varied exhibition. Both the curator and selected artists should be compensated for their efforts.
Wayfinding

The existing wayfinding system in Bellingham serves vehicular traffic through the main thoroughfares, the commercial core and the waterfront. This wayfinding system includes information stations for pedestrians with downtown maps and a bulletin board.

A wayfinding system in the Arts District should take advantage of the unique character of the area by using clear but original ways of helping people navigate the area. Signage is the most apparent way to display information but there are also many, more subtle ways of helping people navigate the city.

- Buildings with prominent features such as the Mount Baker Theatre, the Whatcom Museum and Bellingham Towers help with orientation within the District.
- Using street specific street tree plantings provide a unique character to each street and also help with way finding.
- Unique objects such as clocks and artwork help identify locations.
- Sound can be useful for way finding, such as the sounds of a school bell or the sound of water.

Food & Retail

There are currently a few existing coffee shops and eateries within the Arts District; they are important destinations and serve as activity nodes.

Coffee shops, vendors and restaurants with outdoor seating enliven the street and provide outdoor places for people to meet. The City can encourage more outdoor seating and vendors by streamlining the permit process.
Children in the Arts District

The Arts District can become a destination for all ages by providing public and private places that accommodates the needs of children and families.

A playground at the new library, restrooms, art, family friendly eateries, all contribute to making the Arts District an attractive destination for families.
Implementation

The vision for the Arts District can only be realized through combined efforts of the City of Bellingham and the various interests groups within and surrounding the district. Currently, there is budget for implementing a first set of improvements within the Arts District, these are marked as number 1 in the following map and chart.
Champion Street
at Mt Baker Apartments

The widening of the sidewalk along Mt Baker Apartments serves as an initial demonstration project showing the Arts District sidewalk standard, the new pedestrian lighting standard, new benches and bike racks.

This stretch of Champion Street has a number of small successful businesses that attracts visitors from all over Bellingham. Currently there is some outdoor seating but because of the narrow sidewalk, the seating sometimes conflict with accessibility for people using the sidewalk.

By removing four parking spots and widening the sidewalk, there is adequate room for outdoor seating for the eateries and bike racks for customers.
Art and Children’s Museum

The Art and Children’s Museum will be a magnet for adults and children interested in art and discovery and the museum café a destination for lunch or afternoon tea. To accommodate the higher pedestrian activity around the museum the sidewalk is widened outside the entrance on Flora Street, creating a small pedestrian plaza where visitors and school groups can gather before and after visiting the museum. A bus drop-off area is provided just east of the main entrance. The sidewalk along Grand Avenue is widened to allow the café to spill out with chairs and tables. A piece of artwork can be incorporated into the plaza and there are landscaped areas that separate the plaza from Grand Avenue. Bike parking is also located here, in close proximity to the entrance.

Flora Street

Flora Street connects the Whatcom museum, the new Art and Children’s museum and the Mount Baker Theatre. By encouraging new development and redevelopment to include small retail spaces that face Flora Street, a livelier streetscape can be achieved. Small unique businesses such as galleries, food bars, newsstands, and artist studios will provide storefronts that encourage walking and browsing.

Grand Avenue

Street tree plantings of Oak form a promenade connecting the Bellingham Public Library and Art & Children’s Museum to the downtown area. The existing angle parking is interspersed with planting islands. Wide sidewalks accommodate bookstores and coffee shops to spill out into the street, encouraging visitors to browse and linger.
Bay & Holly Street

The Intersection of Bay, Holly and Prospect streets serve as an important transition area and node between the Commercial District, the Old Town District, the Arts District and the waterfront. The Pickford Dream space, the American Museum of Radio and Electricity and Mindport are all in close proximity.

The intersection already has an “Urban- Hip” feel to it with buildings such as the VECO headquarters, the Bay Street Building and the Mt Baker Apartment providing an eclectic architectural mix and a varying scale. Street level retail and eateries in many buildings in this area create a diverse and attractive environment.

Programming such as street fairs, outdoor cinema, and concerts could create an even more dynamic and diverse place
The right hand slip lane from Holly to Bay Street is dangerous for pedestrians as cars drive through it at high speeds. Removing the slip lane and turning the space into a public plaza was consistently brought up during the public workshops.

To distinguish this intersection through design, the focus will be on creating a pedestrian urban space while still serving as a main thoroughfare. By merging art and design the area becomes a unique place to visit and spend time in.

The connection between the street corners will be strengthened through the use of a seamless paving pattern and vertical art elements.

The improved intersection emphasizes pedestrians over cars by incorporating visual clues that slow traffic and promote walking.
Future improvements

Whatcom Museum

Whatcom Museum (Old City hall) is one of the most prominent buildings in Bellingham; this character will be strengthened by improvements in the public realm that reflects the history of Bellingham. Emphasis should be on designs that will reinforce the relationship between the Arts District and Maritime Heritage Park.

Suggested improvements:

• Improve alley between Whatcom museum and Syre building with lighting and artwork to draw people to the overlook at the west side of the museum, this will strengthen the connection to Maritime Heritage Park and the Waterfront.

• Take advantage of the beautiful vista over Bellingham Bay and Lummi Island from the west side of the museum by building a public gathering space/overlook that includes interpretive displays relating to the past cultural and natural history of the area.

Mount Baker Theatre

The iconic architecture of the Mount Baker Theatre will be strengthened by improvements in the public realm:

• Adding a bulb-out into the street at the main entry places greater emphasis on the entry and allows for activities and vendors outside the theatre.

• The marquee will be redesigned to make it more readable and lively for oncoming traffic – both vehicular and pedestrian.

Future Library

Anchoring the north end of the Arts District is the public library, Bellingham’s most important civic institution fostering education and the exchange of ideas. Tying the Library to its sister institutions, the Art and Children’s Museum as well as the Whatcom History Museum, through art and design in the streetscape, will encourage walking within the Arts District. Joint programming of festivals and special events in the park adjacent to the library promotes synergy between these organizations, enlivening street life overall.
Alleys

Alleys offer a unique opportunity to create interesting, active and usable urban spaces. Although alleys are primarily used for service access to buildings, alleys can be designed to offer attractive, alternative walkable routes to downtown and arts district destinations.

- Lighting, paving, signage, art and “greening” through landscape design are all possible elements that can bring alleys to life.

- Loading and unloading can be limited to certain hours only, making it a safer pedestrian walkway during other times.

- Trash receptacle areas can be condensed and screened and installed for common use by all property owners fronting the public alley.

Two alleys in the Arts District will be emphasized as pedestrian connectors: The alley connecting Holly Street and Magnolia Street and the Alley connecting West Champion Street to the library on Central Avenue.

An annual concert series is held every summer in the alley connecting Holly street and Magnolia Street

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